





— The —  
**Declaration of Independence,**  
**Its Principles and its Power.**

*Address Delivered by*  
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*before the*

***Society of the Cincinnati***

**in the State of Rhode Island**

*in the*  
**State House, Newport, R. I.**



**On the 139th Anniversary of**  
**American Independence**  
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the birth or coronation of the Sovereign, so that in case of an unworthy or tyrannical king, the day which has brought nothing but unmitigated evil and suffering to the people, is that which they must celebrate with acclamations and processions and all outward signs of rejoicing.

But with us there is no such risk and no possible occasion for like hypocrisy, for while we honor the memory of the heroic dead, and bear in mind their virtues on their natal days, for her great annual holiday America celebrates the nativity of her national life, the birthday of her Independence and the freedom of her people. Our holiday is the birthday of the Nation, so that all may join in its celebration, no matter how divergent their ideas as to details of government.

And it is far more than that, for it is the birthday of successful freedom throughout the World; the birthday of the reign of equal rights and free institutions for all mankind!

#### THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

What was the great event, which raises the Fourth of July high above all other days, and causes its universal celebration now, not only in America but in all parts of the World?

We all know that on this day, in 1776, the Continental Congress, composed of representatives from the thirteen English colonies stretching from New Hampshire to Georgia, adopted by a unanimous vote the Declaration of Independence, which dissolved their connection with Great Britain and declared them to be Free and Independent States. It was a momentous act, fraught with the most far-reaching consequences for our people and for mankind.

When we think of the history of the intervening period,—less than a century and a half,—and observe what has been the result of that brave and determined utterance; when we see the three millions of that period transformed into the hundred millions of today; the strip of territory along the Atlantic shore extended across the Continent and to the Islands of the Sea; when we think of the vast progress made in every branch of human industry and invention, development and achievement; and remember all that America and American Institutions stand for today; and when we realize that the greatness and glory of the present are the results of the Declaration made on that Fourth of July in Philadelphia, we begin to appreciate the matchless importance of that remarkable event, even if its influence is to be measured simply as affecting our own people.

Verily, if the men who that day braved the power of Great Britain, had done no more than proclaim our independence and

lay the foundations of the Great Republic, they would have immortalized themselves and the day we celebrate.

But they did far more than that!

The Document which they unanimously adopted and to whose support they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor, was vastly more than a mere declaration of the independence of certain colonies from the sovereignty of Great Britain.

It might easily have been just that and nothing more. The form of the resolution which had been under debate in the Congress for weeks was simply, "That these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent States." If that had been all, the Fourth of July would have meant much to us, it would have been our natal day, and the Declaration our birth certificate; but it would have carried no message to the World at large, and meant nothing to Humanity.

There was nothing new or startling in a declaration of the independence of some subject people from the control of their old masters. Revolts and rebellions and revolutions are found all along the course of history from its beginning. An aggrieved people, the victims of tyranny and oppression, have risen against their rulers and proclaimed their independence, and fought for it with all the strength that they possessed. Generally they have been overthrown and brought back into more bitter bondage, but in many notable cases they have finally succeeded, and either obtained redress of grievances or have conquered a place in the list of self-governing nations.

The result may have been beneficial or disastrous, its effect may have been lasting or evanescent; but whatever it was, it established no principle and settled no great question for all the world. The revolution, if successful, was based on local causes and justified by local reasons; it set no example for the guidance of others and established no principle of government that is common to all. If a manifesto was issued to explain the necessity for revolution, it was simply an enumeration of grievances and an arraignment of the power sought to be overthrown. The American Declaration of Independence might have been like its predecessors, and simply proclaimed the freedom of the colonies, or enumerated the acts of tyranny and oppression which made continued subserviency unendurable.

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF THE DECLARATION.

But our forefathers were not men of contracted vision, nor were they so filled with the thoughts of their own circumstances, that they gave no heed to matters beyond their own horizon. What they claimed for themselves, they believed to be equally the right



of all mankind; and they based their own demands on the fact that they were a part of that common humanity. Fully realizing all the vastness of the principles involved, the patriots of 1776 did not use this solemn occasion to speak simply of themselves and the sparsely settled colonies they represented, but to proclaim in words which will never die the rights of all men, everywhere and always, and the God-given liberty of all human beings by virtue of their common humanity. Thus the declaration which they set forth was broadened into a proclamation of world-wide interest, and its claims were for world-wide welfare; and that which might have been only a statement of the grievances of a provincial people was raised to the immortal dignity of the Magna Charta of Mankind.

It is this which makes the Declaration of Independence what it is; and the day of its adoption one of the great landmarks in the history of the race.

It was not a plea of justification, for a special occasion, but it was the proclamation of great truths, unchangeable through all time, sent ringing down the vista of the ages; it was not an argument for a local change in government, but it laid down broad Principles, applicable to all continents and all people. It was this which instantly drew to our contest the eyes of liberty-loving men throughout the world, and which raised the Revolution from a mere revolt of a discontented people, to the high plain of a Holy Struggle for the Rights of Man.

From then until now, the Principles of our Declaration of Independence have been the platform of every oppressed people, and the clarion tones of its bold announcement the rallying cry in every battle for free institutions. Every advance of humanity has been based upon its language; every struggle for liberty has been stimulated by its words; every Republic which has arisen in this century and a half of progress is founded on the undying principles which it announced.

What are these golden words which thus express the fundamental principles of civilized and Christian government?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights;" and having thus proclaimed these great principles, the Declaration continues, "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Here, in few words, so plainly stated that there can be no mistake and no evasion, were boldly announced the two great principles of free government.

1. *The absolute equality of all men before the law.*

"All men," with no exception, no exemption; and that not by mere human enactment, but by creation, by the hand of God himself. Not by the charter of kings of their good pleasure; but natural, inherent rights, belonging to all men by virtue of their manhood; above all kingly control and by the charter of God alone.

Based on this foundation and on the additional self-evident proposition that "all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," comes the second great principle.

2. *That all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.*

This also was a complete reversal of the prevailing monarchical idea of a King by the grace of God, and subjects born to do his bidding. The old theory and old practice were based on the idea that government came first, and afterwards the people who were governed; but the Declaration changed all that in a moment, and, putting the People first, declared that governments were instituted simply to secure the rights of Man, and that the consent of the governed was the source of all just official power. In other words it proclaimed the majesty of Manhood, and that those placed in authority were the ministers and servants of Humanity.

This statement of the foundation and duty of just government is not made after the assertion of the independence of the Colonies, as a reason or justification for that change in condition, but it stands as the primary and fundamental declaration in the great document. The announcement of great principles is the first expressed thought, and takes precedence of everything else; and then, as a necessary consequence of those principles, and their practical operation in our particular case, comes the Declaration of the Independence of the American Colonies.

These principles themselves were not announced as something specially applicable to the Thirteen Colonies; but they were general, universal, for all time and all mankind.

It is this which makes the Fourth of July and its great Declaration belong, not to us only, but to the World.

This venerable Society, in its very inception, demonstrated in the first of its "immutable principles" that it recognized this comprehensive and world-including idea, as that for which its members had battled, as well as for the independence of the colonies. What words could be stronger or more far-reaching than these in the statement of its first object?

"An incessant attention to preserve inviolate those exalted

Rights and Liberties of Human Nature, for which they have fought and bled, and without which the high rank of a rational being is a curse instead of a blessing."

So much for the Principles of the great Declaration.

#### THE POWER OF THE DECLARATION.

Of the Power and influence which it has exerted on the minds and actions of men ever since its promulgation, there is little time to speak; nor does it need more than brief mention, for the facts are known and read of all men.

The first effect was to enlist the chivalrous support of liberty-loving men throughout the world in the success of our Revolutionary struggle. They not only recognized the justice of our cause, but they felt that they were fighting for the liberty of mankind. The Declaration had crystalized into a noble form the aspirations of the Ages.

It was this that brought to our aid the youthful enthusiasm of Lafayette, the patriotic fervor of Pulaski and Kosciusko, the experienced military genius of Steuben, and the ardent support of scores of others who crossed the ocean to aid in the struggle for freedom.

And when victory was achieved, and the Great Republic started on its career, as the shining example of free institutions, it was the Power of the Principles of the Declaration, which gradually permeated the minds of men and led to the almost universal aspiration for freedom.

The result has changed the whole complexion of the world. One after another, the old Spanish provinces of South and Central America threw off the yoke of foreign domination and became republics. Even Brazil, which under an amiable dynasty had long endured as an Empire, overthrew its own monarchy, and under free institutions is a wonderful example of progress. France, as a Republic, is the daughter of our Declaration of Independence. She was an ardent admirer of Franklin, and from his words of wisdom received many a lesson, which even today is bearing fruit. England itself, though then the oppressor and still a monarchy, has been practically transformed into a government of the people, and has almost become one of the children of the great Declaration which was directed against the tyranny of her administration in 1776.

And most wonderful of all, the most conservative people upon Earth, among whom the reign of unchanged ancient custom is counted not by centuries, but thousands of years, has felt the influence of the Principles of the Declaration; and China has taken her place among the republics of the world.



If there is any disappointment that these wonderful results are not even more general, and that free institutions have not yet become universal, let us remember the long time required even in our own country for the full acceptance of the great Principles of the Declaration.

Here in the United States it required almost a century to come up to the full measure of the stature of those great fundamental truths. While held theoretically, it was impossible to give them full practical effect as long as old systems directly antagonistic prevailed. So long as human slavery existed in the land, the first great principle, that "all men are created equal," was practically ignored.

But there stood the Declaration, proclaiming an immutable principle, which it called self-evident, as a constant reminder that whatever was inconsistent with it was necessarily wrong and temporary, and that the vision of the future and the effort of the present must always be exerted towards the final, practical operation of the principles which everyone theoretically accepted.

It required time, and unfortunately it did not come without a convulsion which shook the Nation; but at last it did come, and in 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment of the National Constitution, which declared that, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist within the United States," brought our institutions into harmony with that fundamental principle of the Declaration of Independence. Eighty-nine years had passed before this basal principle of free government was thus formally accepted by our own people and made a living fact in our own land.

It was nearly three years later before the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment secured to every citizen absolutely equal rights before the law; and almost two additional years were required before the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment insured full protection for those equal rights by placing in the hands of every man the Ballot.

That final consummation was on March 30, 1870; so that nearly 94 years had passed before the full fruition of the glorious Declaration of 1776, and the insertion in the body of the Constitution itself, of all those Rights of Man, which the Declaration had proclaimed to be God-given and unalienable.

It was a source of high patriotic gratification to those of us who assisted in celebrating the Centennial Fourth of July, in 1876, that before that time, every great principle of the Declaration of Independence was firmly embodied in the Constitution.

In recent years there has been a tendency, among some of the newer generation, flippantly to depreciate the wisdom and

even deprecate the action of the patriotic men who, after saving the Union from destruction, planted the foundations of the regenerated Republic firmly on the solid basis of the Principles of the Declaration of Independence, by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution.

In Christian charity we may try to excuse such recreancy to the clear-eyed vision of our forefathers, on the ground of ignorance of the conditions existing in the "days that tried men's souls;" but we should none the less be ever ready to meet with prompt reply and righteous indignation, such attempts to lower the standard of Equal Rights for all Men.

So, again, professional politicians in several states, have attempted by various ingenious methods of indirection and subterfuge, to nullify the plain Principles of the Declaration as they are now embodied in the Constitution; and with somewhat of temporary success; but we can certainly all rejoice, on this Fourth of July, 1915, that the Supreme Court of the United States, within the last few weeks, by the unanimous vote of all its members, has swept away all this disguised unconstitutionality, and left the Rights of Man, as protected by the 14th and 15th Amendments, entirely unimpaired.

As sons of our Fathers, glorying in their faith and proud of their achievements, we members of the Cincinnati should ever be ready to stand as the guardians and defenders of the great Principles for which they fought, and to frown on every attempt to treat them with disrespect or prevent their practical application.

It is of infinite value to have before us an absolute standard of political righteousness, with which we may compare newly devised theories, specious arguments, or acts of apparent expediency but doubtful justice.

Novel conditions and changing circumstances will constantly present new phases and problems in human government, to the end of time. Some will involve the glamour of national aggrandisement, concealing the selfishness of personal interest; appeals to covetousness and cupidity, to ambition and a falsely styled "national honor;" specious reasons will be presented for class legislation at home, and for interference with independent nations abroad.

Others may be deceived and led away from the standard of right, and the rugged honesty of our forefathers. But for the Members of the Cincinnati, there is always one standard by which any new question can be judged, and that is composed of the "self-evident truths" of the Declaration of Independence, and the "Immutable Principles" of our time-honored Society.











